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**Universidad de Valladolid**

FACULTAD de FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS  
DEPARTAMENTO de FILOLOGÍA INGLESA  
Grado en Estudios Ingleses

TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

From Steinbeck to Bukowski: The Evolution of the  
Social Commitment of the Twentieth-Century  
American Literature

Javier Martín Cáceres

Tutor: Jesús Benito Sánchez  
2019-2020



## ABSTRACT

The social and political commitment of American literature has been unquestionable since its origins. Despite this, many literary critics have questioned the social implication of postmodern literature, due to its disassociation from any type of ideological current. On the contrary, other authors recognize in this literature a strong commitment to the defense of individual liberties. This paper aims to analyze the characteristics of postmodern social criticism, through the study of Charles Bukowski's work *Post Office*. At the same time, this paper develops a comparison with the social criticism present in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, with the objective of analyzing the parallels and divergences between postmodern criticism and the critique developed during modernism.

Key Words: Social Commitment, Social Realism, Dirty Realism, Bukowski, Steinbeck, Postmodernism.

El compromiso social y político de la literatura norteamericana ha sido indudable desde sus orígenes. A pesar de ello, muchos críticos literarios han puesto en cuestión la implicación social de la literatura posmodernista, debido a su desvinculación con cualquier tipo de corriente ideológica. Por el contrario, otros autores reconocen en esta literatura un fuerte compromiso con la defensa de las libertades individuales. Este trabajo pretende analizar las características de la crítica social posmoderna, a través del estudio de la obra de Charles Bukowski *Post Office*. A su vez, desarrolla una comparación con la crítica social presente en la novela de John Steinbeck *The Grapes of Wrath*, con el objetivo de analizar los paralelismos y las divergencias entre la crítica posmoderna y la desarrollada durante el modernismo.

Palabras clave: Compromiso social, Realismo Social, Realismo Sucio, Bukowski, Steinbeck, Posmodernismo.



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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, American literature has shown an evident social and political commitment. However, this commitment has been developed through very different methods, adapted to the specific social characteristics of each period. Some of these methods are clearly identifiable, while others, corresponding to specific periods, have often been misinterpreted or simply overlooked. This is the case of postmodernist literature. Many literary critics have questioned its social character, due to its strong ideological dissociation. This paper attempts to analyze the different social critiques carried out by American modernist and postmodernist literature, making a comparison between them, in order to be able to study both their differences and the characteristics they have in common. In this way, this paper tries to demonstrate the true critical character of American postmodernist literature, trying to understand the complex characteristics that define its political and social commitment.

Specifically, this study will focus on comparing American Social Realism, developed during the first half of the twentieth century, and so-called Dirty Realism, developed in the second half of the century. In representation of social realism, we will take as object of study John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1951), due to its faithful narration of the serious social situation that the United States suffered after the economic crisis during the decade of the 30's. In representation of the dirty realism, we will focus on Charles Bukowski's work *Post Office* (1976), which makes a denunciation of the American social conditions after the Second World War. These two new realistic literary currents will capture with strong humanist interest the social injustices caused by the abuses of power of the great economic powers, and the consequences they have on individuals. However, the different social situation of the first and second half of the twentieth century will define the way in which these two currents develop their criticism.

In order to achieve this objective, this paper will use the following methodology, divided into three different chapters: The first chapter will use the work of several twentieth and twenty-first century philosophers to try to analyze the different scientific advances, political, philosophical and social changes that occurred during the twentieth

century, which greatly affected the American artistic and intellectual paradigm. The work *Frente al Miedo* (2015), by the philosopher Antonio Escohotado, collects a thought that can be of help when trying to understand the philosophical implications of the development of modern physics, especially the so-called Science of Chaos. In addition, the study of Albert Camus' work *The Rebel* (*L'Homme révolté*, 1951) and Ernst Jünger's *The Forest Passage* (*Der Waldgang*, 1951) reveals a philosophical thought that shows parallels with the evolution of postmodernist literature, focusing especially on political and social evolution during the 1950s. The aim of this chapter is to analyze the possible influence that these events could have on the American literary paradigm. The second chapter analyses the social criticism present in Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, studying the presence of socialist ideology in the work and its denunciation of the working and economic conditions of the American population. Lucía Mora's essay *John Steinbeck y "The Grapes of Wrath": La Novela Proletaria ante la Sociedad Americana* (1993) will help to contextualize the social commitment of American social realism, as well as to identify the presence of Marxist ideology in this current. With these elements, we will try to define the modernist characteristics of Steinbeck's novel, and we will try to determine how they influence his way of representing reality and society. Finally, the third chapter will analyze the social criticism in Bukowski's work *Post Office*, in parallel to the analysis developed in the previous chapter, with the objective of being able to establish a comparison later. The essay *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), by American literary critic Linda Hutcheon, will help to understand the political implication of Bukowski's work. She develops a general defense of the political character of postmodernist literature. Finally, this paper will try to establish the possible connections between this type of literary social criticism and some of the twentieth century philosophical currents studied in the first chapter.

Through this methodology, this paper will examine the evolution of the political and social commitment of American literature throughout the twentieth century, trying to define its specific characteristics, very different from the social criticism carried out by American literature during the nineteenth century.



## **Political, Philosophical and Scientific Development in the Twentieth Century**

In the twentieth century, the social commitment of American literature was expressed in very diverse ways. Despite sharing certain characteristics, it is evident that there are great differences between the social criticism represented in American literature in the first half of the century and the second. In order to understand both, their similarities and differences, it is necessary to pay attention to the advances and profound changes that society in Western countries underwent during the twentieth century. Social, economic and technological changes that transformed the political, philosophical and artistic paradigm of the time.

### **Scientific Advances**

It is impossible to ignore the influence of scientific advances on other disciplines and on society. Nineteenth-century society was shaken by the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), whose theory on the origin and evolution of species dispelled the idea of man as the center of the universe, as being of superior status within nature. This illusion, sustained both by the church and by scientists, who thought that reason placed human beings in an almost divine position in front of the rest of creatures, collapsed when it was scientifically proven that human beings are just another organism within the planet's enormous biodiversity. Forty years later, the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), by Sigmund Freud, raised new philosophical issues. This work revealed the existence of the subconscious in our minds, which forced the human being to admit and assume its irrationality, and the role it plays in their decisions. This theory began to highlight the limits in man's ability to know himself and the world around him.

These limitations in the accuracy with which the human being is able to know reality were confirmed throughout the first half of the twentieth century, mainly through three scientific theories within the field of physics, which radically changed the concept of *matter*. Previously, classical physics was based on the mathematical principles of Isaac Newton. These, applied to the solar system, drew a universe of inert matter, dead bodies

without will, whose movement and becoming was only produced by the effect that some external force exerted on them. Through this model, the human being is able to measure with exactitude the movement of the bodies, with the development of the calculus. As the physicist Mario Markus explains in his article “A Scientist’s Adventures in Postmodernism” (2000):

Based on reason, humans have projected into the future through various ideological programs: the Reformation, the Counter Reformation, German Idealism, Marxism and, in the natural sciences, Newtonism. I use the word “reason” here in the sense of “calculability”. Newton’s work aroused a claim for predictability. (182)

The first theory that began to question this reality was Albert Einstein's theory of Relativity. Adding the variable of the speed of light, he showed that the relationship between matter and energy was closer than was believed. The second advance was the development of quantum physics, focused on the study of matter at the atomic level. Heisenberg's principle of indetermination demonstrated the impossibility of precision in the measurement of the velocity and position of particles. In addition, he demonstrated that this was not caused by the effect of the observer, but that it was a fundamental property of matter, due to the wave-particle duality.

However, it was Chaos theory that in the 1950s totally changed the idea of predictability and accuracy in science, contradicting traditional calculus and deterministic theses. Newton's concept of matter, moved only by inertia, became obsolete. After this, the conception of the universe changed radically, revealing an infinitely more complex and living reality, a self-produced order. As the philosopher, Antonio Escohotado explains in his essay *Frente al Miedo* (2015): “Quizá lo más equívoco sea la propia palabra caos, que no significa aquí desorden, oscuridad o espanto, sino realidad sensible y vitalidad”, (513). Faced with the idea of an inert matter, this new theory reveals a very different reality. Chaos demonstrates the creative capacity of matter itself. The knowledge of this vitality of matter forced science to develop new disciplines according to it as the study of thermodynamics and fractals. The old traditional calculus no longer served to explain and measure the new reality revealed:

Si el cálculo no sirve para predecir la conducta de sistemas físicos reales es simplemente porque no resulta predecible aquello que está haciéndose a sí mismo, la invención en general, sea ello el clima, el precio de cierto bien, o el estado de ánimo propio. Esas realidades [...] son refractarias al álgebra porque no constituyen procesos lineales (valga decir analíticos), sino creativos en sentido estricto. (Escohotado, 274)

As we will see in the next section, these advances in the field of physics had an enormous ontological, philosophical and political repercussion on the society of the 1950s. The old system based on Newton's principles faced concepts such as spirit and matter, or force and mass; thus supporting a strict and absolutist social order, a subjugation of individual freedom before an external and superior structuring order, be it God or the Leviathan of Hobbes:

En definitiva, prima un orden impuesto desde fuera-esa es la ansiada seguridad burguesa-, en detrimento del que podría brotar desde dentro, y ello precisamente cuando la colosal entidad de los cambios llama a revisar las pautas de conformidad social, los criterios del progreso y desarrollo, las definiciones de libertad. (Escotado, 518)

The greatest philosophical repercussion lies in a new exaltation of individual freedom, faced with the collective and class struggle of the first half of the twentieth century. Politically, this return to the individual is an affirmation of democratic values, so harshly criticized by totalitarianisms until the end of the Second World War:

El descubrimiento de un orden surgido espontáneamente de la disipación y de la turbulencia afecta a la raíz misma del contrato social, pues no solo niega la necesidad de colectivos llevados a la docilidad por manipulación y terror, sino el propio principio del gobierno como cosa distinta del autogobierno. (Escotado, 520)

The science of chaos, applied to politics, develops a new idea of individual freedom. A spirit of rebellion against any interventionist order that restricts the free and complex creativity of the individual and against any kind of centralized power. This new conception of freedom entails an exaltation of the value of individual experience. It implies a responsibility for the individual, who is now obliged to face and judge the complexity of reality for himself, without the tutelage of social models that simplify and filter reality for him, promising a false feeling of security to the detriment of his freedom. The new individual has to face by himself the dangers of action, chance, complexity, the mystery of the world, interpreting his own experiences, his sensations, facing the fear and insecurity caused by self-construction. Human beings must leave his social hiding place, where it was only important to remember and abide by the symbols of their culture and community. Only through his own experience will he be able to reach knowledge, develop his intellectual criteria and gain his freedom.

## **Evolution of the Political Left in the Twentieth Century**

The evolution of social criticism and the defense of social rights through literature is closely linked to the development of politics during the twentieth century. In particular, it is important to study the influence that the evolution of Marxist ideology had on this literature. It affected the way in which American authors embodied their social commitment. It influenced their way of reflecting and denouncing the life of Americans under conditions of abuse and manipulation by the powers of society.

Committed to the rights of the working class and the struggle against the abuses of power by the bourgeoisie, the Left underwent a radical change after the end of the Second World War. What had been a class struggle, and mostly a struggle for equality according to communist ideology, had to adapt to the new socio-political conditions. The alliance between the liberal and communist countries against fascism ended with the fall of the Axis Powers in 1945. The world was divided into two irreconcilable blocs defined by two opposing economic systems. In this context, most of the socialist parties of the western countries that still claimed the communist system accepted the capitalist economic system and liberal democracy. At the same time, the majority of the working class supported this system with their vote. The communist left became social democrat. This new left adapted its ideology by accepting its democratic participation in the organization of a strong state that protects the individual rights and freedoms of each citizen. Its new role in democracy consisted of continuing to defend workers' rights, through the struggle for a social security system, the struggle of trade unions for better working conditions and the struggle for the introduction of a progressive taxation system among other measures. As we will analyze in chapters 2 and 3, this political paradigm shift may have influenced American social literature. During the modernism of the first half of the century, it is possible to identify the Marxist influence in some works belonging to the so-called Social Realism, and in the proletarian novel. On the contrary, the works published after the Second World War show a much more evident commitment to the defense of individual freedom.

Although Social Realism and the American proletarian novel were clearly influenced by Marxism, this influence is not comparable to the influence that Marxism had on the literature of other European countries. Among other causes, this was due to the democratic and liberal tradition of the United States since its foundation. In fact, the

first bases of social democracy can be found in Thomas Paine's work *Rights of Man*, published in 1791. As Escotado points out with irony, Paine, in this work, develops many of the technical measures that the left will adopt during the second half of the twentieth century:

El fruto más ambicioso de su verbo –Derechos del Hombre– propone superar “el gobierno arbitrario”, y lo propone precisamente con una entronización de la libertad personal que por su propio interés asegure educación gratuita, pensiones de jubilación y empleo en obras públicas para el parado, todo ello con cargo a un impuesto progresivo sobre la renta. Estos sediciosos e inviables planes los expuso a principios de 1791. (97)

Another figure we cannot forget is Thomas Jefferson, one of the drafters of the Declaration of Independence of the United States and the third president of the country. As Escotado points out, as he evaluates the history of the defense of political freedom during the enlightenment:

Pero en ninguna manifestación histórica ha alcanzado, a mi juicio, tanta nitidez el radicalismo liberal como en el pensamiento de Thomas Jefferson, cuyas tesis podrían considerarse idealistas si no hubieran cristalizado en la más duradera constitución conocida. (69)

Later, during the nineteenth century, American romantic literature inherited that democratic and libertarian character. Transcendentalist authors such as Emerson or Thoreau developed in their works a humanism centered on the autonomy of individuality. Works such as *Nature* (1836) or *Walden* (1854) exalt the importance of personal experience, in conditions of isolation in nature. Although with a strong idealistic and romantic character, they explore the parallels and connections between the human spirit and nature (Physis). This ontological issue will be developed during the literature of postmodernism from a more materialistic, realistic and complex perspective, as we will see in the third chapter. We must not forget the social implication of these authors. Many of them were personally involved in the struggle for the abolition of slavery. Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* (1849) was later catalogued as utopian socialism. A current of socialism centered on social struggle in an individual context, rather than questioning the organization of the state or the great masses. Interestingly, after the application and failure of communist regimes, based on scientific socialism, certain ideas from so-called utopian socialism have proven to be far more realistic. As we will see in the next chapter, the proletarian novel and American social realism will be heavily influenced by this humanistic and democratic heritage, making them less permeable to Marxist ideology. Its

non-revolutionary social character was more in keeping with the new philosophies of the second half of the century.

## **New Philosophical Currents of the Twentieth Century**

After the horrors of the Second World War, philosophical thought acquired a strong nihilistic character, defending individual freedom. However, the loss of any moral value seemed to justify a worrying substantiation of violence and ultraconservative policies. It is in this context that Existentialist philosophy and its concept of freedom emerge. Meditating on the meaning of life, authors like Sartre questioned the essence of the human being. Man's life does not obey any concrete reason nor is it linked to any purpose. We are condemned to choose our actions. We are free. Nevertheless, this freedom provokes anguish in the human spirit. It is an enormous responsibility and personal courage. Human beings have to fight cowardice in order to face this responsibility and this freedom. He must create his identity. Culture is only a human creation. Authors like Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), applied these ideas to her feminist struggle. Women must choose and create their own identity instead of accepting any role imposed on them by society. Although this freedom is individual, existentialist authors such as Sartre progressively approached Marxist ideology, trying to combine both doctrines. Albert Camus disagreed with Sartre on this and other issues. Escotado deepens:

Mi generación debe mucho a J.P. Sartre, tan admirable por bravura y energía. Lo que no soporta la prueba del tiempo es ese tipo suyo de existencia desencarnada o solo intelectual, que siente náusea ante la biología y acaba redactando “Crítica de la Razón Dialéctica”, un texto tan dogmático como el “Catecismo” de Ripalda aunque cien veces más largo. Camus matizó la desencarnación existencialista con dones muy superiores de humanidad e intuición poética; era de carne y hueso. (56)

Camus' absurdist philosophy contains parallels with the first steps of postmodernist literature in the United States. In his essay *The Rebel* (1951), Camus establishes the concept of rebellion as the only means to achieve true human freedom and social justice. Rebellion is the vehicle that the individual possesses to confront and protest against the absurd, against his ignorance of the world. It is their only evidence: “I proclaim that I believe in nothing and that everything is absurd, but I cannot doubt the validity of my proclamation and I must at least believe in my protest. The first and only evidence that is supplied me, within the terms of the absurdist experience, is rebellion.” (Camus, 9)

Camus faces rebellion against the concept of revolution. His work is a denunciation of all totalitarianisms, fascists and communists: "Rebellious thought [...], has not ceased to deny this demand in the presence of bourgeois nihilism as well as of Caesarian socialism." (149). According to Camus, the two evils are based on their radical relationship with history: "Thought that is derived from history alone, like thought that rejects history completely, deprives man of the means and the reason for living. The former drives him to the extreme decadence of "why live?" the latter to "how live?"" (124). Therefore, the rebel man denies, but affirms. Transform. He does not destroy the history that limits him, but he puts a limit on it. This limit is his rebellion. His personal creation. Individual freedom and art take on transcendental ontological importance:

But rebellion, in man, is the refusal to be treated as an object and to be reduced to simple historical terms. [...], History, undoubtedly, is one of the limits of man's experience; in this sense the revolutionaries are right. But man, by rebelling, imposes in his turn a limit to history (124)

In the third chapter, we will see how the American literary critic Linda Hutcheon, in her essay *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) concludes that one of the main political characteristics intrinsic to postmodernism is precisely this duality, this contradiction. Reality is represented by giving equal importance to the history (exterior) and self-reflection (interior, art) of the individual (2). It is a struggle against centralism. A subversion of cultural conventions. During the 1950s, a new neo-realist interest emerged in American literature. After twenty years, American society once again became economically prosperous. In this context, a new type of literary character, *the rebel*, appears. Like Camus' rebel man, this figure fights for his freedom against the establishment and conformism of society. He fights against the manipulative propaganda of the new economic powers. The rebel marginalizes himself from society by his own will in order to rebel against the system. It is an act of freedom and creativity. In fiction, external reality and internal or psychological perspective take on equal importance and mix in confused complexity. Under this premise, new literary currents appear such as the so-called Beat Generation, New Journalism and, later, Dirty Realism. The implication of the author and his personal experience in the different cultural events of the country becomes the central theme of postmodern literature.

## Twentieth-Century Economic and Social Changes

American society underwent a major transformation from the 1950s onwards. Economic growth and the technological revolution led to a great improvement in the living conditions of the population. The growth of consumption allowed the creation of a wealthy middle class. The working class could afford to save money, get bank loans, own a house, a car, invest. However, in this new optimistic and prosperous society, the system of power also underwent an adaptation. The new mass society, and the advantageous situation of the United States over Europe, which had been devastated during the war, allowed the traditional economic powers to increase their level of control over the population. The old systems of coercion evolved into a capacity for manipulation of social masses through propaganda and the development of the media. The work *The Forest Passage* by the German philosopher Ernst Jünger can help to understand the role of the rebel in this new society. Interestingly, it was published in 1951, the same year as Camus' *The Rebel*. Both authors were criticized for both fascism and communism. There are many parallels between Jünger's figure of the *forest rebel* and that of the *rebel* in Camus' novel. Both exalt individual freedom as transcendental. Jünger explains how the individual faces these new powers, manipulators of majorities, which restrict his free choice:

But how should our man behave if he is to pass up the last possibility conceded him to express his views? With this question, we touch the borders of a new science—the teaching of human freedom in the face of changed forms of power, (Jünger, 22).

The social struggle now lies in an individual or minority struggle. The social demands of previous decades had demanded the liberation of the working class. The new demands focus on the defense of the individual identity against the identity imposed by a manipulated culture. The Rebel isolates himself from society. He opposes automatism, the unity of voices. However, he carries this out without pursuing a political revolution against the system. It is an individual responsibility. It implies, according with Jünger: “the individual's conflict with the technical collective and its world.” (32).

This new kind of social struggle for freedom will affect the way American literature shapes its social commitment during the second half of the twentieth century. This new literature will coincide with the great cultural changes of the 1960s. In 1968, the European left again revised Marxism, following the philosophical thinking of authors such as Foucault, Derrida and Althusser. This awakened a new revolutionary spirit around Europe. On the contrary, in the United States, this revolt had a very different character.



In the first place, it was based on the struggle for the civil rights of the population. It was the great upsurge of women's liberation movements and the African American community. In addition, it is important to take into account the contribution of the American counterculture and the hippie movement in the development of individual freedoms. This moved away from the purely rational and intellectual philosophy of a society that seemed conservative to them. Instead, their quest for freedom focused on more "*corporeal*" fields such as sexual liberation and experimentation with LSD in the field of perception. Her philosophy was a new exaltation of rebellion, freedom and individual experimentation. Its effect and scope on culture were enormous.



## **Social Commitment of American Literature during the First Half of the Twentieth Century**

Focusing on a deeper study of the first half of the twentieth century, we will take as the object of analysis John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. This novel, both for its own characteristics and those of its author, is interesting to analyze the social implication of American literature and to understand its complexity. Steinbeck, a member of the lost generation, explores and denounces the conditions of the working class from a modernist perspective, very different from the realistic perspective with which previous generations of novelists captured the problems of their society. Moreover, it is a good example of how Marxist influence affected American literature in a less profound way due to, as we saw in the first chapter, a tradition of democracy and defense of individual freedom. Through this work, the author describes the living conditions of American society under the effects of the great economic depression of the 1930s. With a strong humanist character, the author explores the human condition, feelings and psychology of characters manipulated and violated by the powers of society. He denounces a dehumanization of society caused by the continuous concentration of power in a reduced number of companies that monopolize the economic sectors. With all these elements, we will try to establish the influence that the evolution of philosophical and political ideas during the twentieth century, studied in the previous chapter, may have had on the content of this work.

### **A New Artistic Paradigm: Modernism**

The twentieth century began with a paradigm shift in the field of the arts. Modernism and all the avant-gardes broke with the realistic and rationalist tradition of the nineteenth century. The scientific and philosophical advances of the time prompted a new, more complex conception of reality. During the first decade of the century, most of the authors' interest was in experimentation. They experimented with form, with the idea of capturing the subjective component of reality, through different perspectives. They described a psychological, non-linear time and a reality based on change. Most authors developed these experiments through poetry. In the second decade, after the First World War, the new generation of writers suffered disenchantment with their society. Retaining this

interest in literary experimentation, they began to feel a new interest in their country's social situation and to question their American identity. The so-called lost generation, in which Steinbeck himself can be included, felt a strong rejection of the traditional values of their country. After the war, old moral values could no longer be considered acceptable. They felt that they lived in a society without values. As a form of rebellion, they chose to go into exile in Paris, in search of new ethical, moral and artistic values. After their experience abroad, they decided to return to their country. As Lucia Mora explains in her essay *John Steinbeck y 'The Grapes of Wrath': La Novela Proletaria ante la Sociedad Americana*, these authors: “De vuelta a casa, todavía continuaban pensando que eran oprimidos por la gran masa blanca de la sociedad americana e intentaban defender sus propios criterios, viviendo al margen de los valores morales de la sociedad norteamericana”, (78). They strongly rejected the attitude of an affluent middle class and questioned in their works all the social conventions accepted in their society. Instead of trying to rebel against the system, they simply rejected it, trying to develop their own criteria through art and creativity. They imported the new ideas they had learned in France. Among other influences, his admiration for the French symbolists stood out. Above all, they exalted the value of freedom. As Mora states:

La proclama del escritor en los años de la posguerra era de libertad: libertad para que el individuo se pudiera expresar libremente. El mandato categórico de los años veinte era que el alma libre debía buscar la libertad, una idea con la que Thoreau, casi un siglo antes, también había estado de acuerdo. (64)

His focus was on individual freedom of expression. In response to the puritanism of their society, they accepted positively the ideas of Psychoanalysis, which began to be known in America after the war. As Mora explains: “La contribución de Freud en los Estados Unidos a la ideología del periodo fue más marcada que la de Marx”. (81) This doctrine gave them a scientific justification for developing subjects such as sex or violence. It was useful to them to break the puritan conventions of American society that imposed sexual restrictions incompatible with the new currents of sexual freedom. This generation, according with Mora: “Asumió la responsabilidad de renovar la cultura según los nuevos principios y lo que parecía una intuición nuevamente adquirida sobre la naturaleza humana”. (89)

This renewal did not reject all tradition or all history in a revolutionary way. It simply added its own psychological perspective as a cultural contribution. Their struggle

was not intended to reverse any political or economic system, but to affect the culture and moral values of their society. The third decade of the century was marked by the consequences of the crash of 1929 and the country's great economic depression. Both in society and in literature, new currents of a more social character appeared.

### **A New Realistic Literary Movement: Social Realism**

In the 1930s, art could not ignore the conditions of misery in which thousands of Americans lived after the great economic depression. Widespread unemployment and social helplessness pushed much of the population to live in a state of misery never before known in the United States. This situation awakened a new social interest in writers. Mora explains this implication: “Ante toda esta serie de problemas, los intelectuales que durante la era del jazz mostraron un desinterés hacia la política, en la década de los treinta manifestaron una reacción contra la injusticia social”, (61). Even belonging to the middle class and not to the proletariat, many authors of the lost generation began to write describing this social situation. This meant a new rise of the novel over poetry. The novel underwent a change in both content and form. It was adapted to this new realist trend, which tried to narrate faithfully the social reality of his country. This new movement, known as Social Realism, was developed through various artistic disciplines, especially literature and photography. Within its literary facet, new genres such as documentary literature were developed. Many authors decided to travel around the country to get to know the true social situation of the population. The so-called American Southern Literature played an important role in the development of this new kind of realist novel. Authors such as Steinbeck, Faulkner or Erskine Caldwell used the novel to describe the society of the southern states, especially affected by the economic situation. They detailed the psychological consequences on the individuals affected by this situation of misery and abandonment. His novels revealed the social problems caused by the abuses of capitalism.

Despite its markedly realistic character, Social Realism maintained its modernist characteristics. Proof of this are Faulkner's novels, which represented a great innovation in the development of narrative techniques. Using the interior monologue (representing stream of consciousness) and the inclusion of several narrators, Faulkner described a broken and complex reality, telling stories where time was psychological rather than

linear. In general, Social Realism combined a materialistic realism with the subjectivism of human psychology. The combination of these elements, as we will see in the next chapter, will continue to develop in American literature over the coming decades, and will play an important role in postmodernist literature. As Mora analyzes, the realism of these authors: “no implicaba necesariamente un estricto materialismo metafísico en el que el asunto físico era considerado como la primera sustancia de todas las cosas existentes” (98). His analysis of material reality did not exclude the importance of the individual mind, psychology, the human spirit. As Mora explains: “Quizás la forma más apropiada de caracterizar el pensamiento de estos escritores sea su condición de literatos realistas y filósofos naturalistas que atribuyeron un valor especial a los estados espirituales de los hombres”. (99)

The antecedents of this technique can be found in nineteenth-century American realist and naturalist literature. In the last years of the century, these materialistic currents opened up and began to take an interest in human thought and creativity. Authors such as Jack London had already combined human psychology with the traditional techniques of realistic literature. Henry James wrote about the American artist from a realistic perspective. As the author himself stated, his concept of realist literature sought to define reality through impressions arising from the individual's own experience, and not through the study of an objective reality, external to the individual, (Mora, 154). For him, authors had to be courageous and show their true vision of reality, from their own perspective.

Despite their strong social involvement, most authors of the 1930s rejected Marxism and fascism in the same way. However, as the conditions of the population worsened, some American authors began to be more influenced by Marxist ideology. Literature began to analyze the struggle and organization of the working class. New literary genres adapted to this question emerged, such as the Revolutionary Novel and the Proletarian Novel.

### **Social Criticism in *The Grapes of Wrath***

The progressive and liberal political currents, which fought against the corruption of government and big business, lost the influence they had had during the first decades of the century. In this context, in American society, a strong movement emerged against the bourgeoisie and, consequently, Marxist ideology increased its influence in American

literature. However, the American proletarian novel was less affected by this ideological current than the literature of other European countries. We will take as an example the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. In this novel, we can analyze the presence of a socialism more in accordance with individual liberties. The author makes a defense of the struggle of the working class, but as Mora describes: “En “The Grapes of Wrath”, Steinbeck recoge un viaje colectivo desde Oklahoma a California, pero sin enfatizar la implicación de la obra con tipo alguno de doctrina”, (165). In this section, we will analyze the type of socialism that can be observed in this novel. Besides, we will examine the way in which the author describes American society and how it was manipulated by the great economic powers.

### Socialism in *The Grapes of Wrath*

Nevertheless, it is not possible to ignore some revolutionary content in this work. From the same title, the author refers to the word *wrath* as a symbol of the revolutionary insurrection of the working class. This word is repeated several times in different chapters always with this meaning. In general, the tone of the narrator does not extol the revolution as a solution to social problems in any of these passages. On the contrary, this *wrath* always appears only as a kind of warning of what could happen if the social situation continued to worsen. The uprising of the working class is described as a natural consequence of a situation of abuse by the powers of the state. Hunger and misery leave the population with no choice but to consider a violent response against the system: “And in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.” (365) Steinbeck accuses the great landowners of not knowing this fact, which has been fulfilled throughout history:

To know the great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away. And that companion fact: when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed. (249)

The state's lack of response aggravates this situation of misery. The author denounces a government that, fearful of a possible revolution, instead of promoting social security,

spent the money on repressing and intimidating the marginalized and protecting large properties, forgetting to fight against the real causes of misery:

The great companies did not know that the line between hunger and anger is a thin line. And money that might have gone to wages went for gas, for guns, for agents and spies, for blacklists, for drilling. On the highways the people moved like ants and searched for work, for food. And the anger began to ferment. (297)

Despite these allusions to revolution, the socialism of this work is not radical in character. It could be considered a kind of libertarian socialism, closer to anarchism. The influence of this humanist current and in defense of individual freedom, that is characteristic of American literature, can explain the libertarian character of Steinbeck's socialism. In several chapters, the idea of individual freedom is defended against any kind of authority: "On'y one thing in this worl' I'm sure of, an' that's I'm sure nobody got a right to mess with a fella's life. He got to do it all hisself. Help him, maybe, but not tell him what to do." (235)

In this sense, it is interesting to analyze how the idea of private property is represented in the work. Both the tone of the narrator and the opinion of the characters coincide in defending the right to property. They extol its value, describing it in several passages as necessary for freedom and for the personal fulfillment of families. The protagonists of this novel were initially small landowners, families who lived from the cultivation of their own land. After being pressured to sell their land to the big banks, they are pushed into a life of misery and poverty. Precisely, what is criticized throughout the work is the excessive and unjust accumulation of property in the hands of a few owners, not the property itself. Casey, the preacher who travels with the Joad family, criticizes selfishness and greed:

If he needs a million acres to make him fell rich, seems to me he needs it 'cause he feels awful poor inside hisself, and if he's poor in hisself, there ain't no million acres gonna make him feel rich, an' maybe he's disappointed that nothin' he can do'll make him feel rich- not rich like Mis' Wilson was when she give her tent when Grampa died. I ain't tryin' to preach no sermon, but I never seen nobody that's busy as a prairie dog collectin' stuff that wasn't disappointed. (216)

Moreover, this liberal socialism can be seen in the defense of an idea of self-government. The social struggle is channeled through the union of workers, the organization of trade unions and strikes. This kind of action can be seen in the way immigrants organize their society in the government camp where the Joad family is housed for some time. The



inhabitants themselves organize their security; vote their own laws and their own rules without being subject to any authority that imposes any kind of order on them. In chapter twenty-eight, when Tom says goodbye to his mother, he explains that he would like to see that same system prevail throughout the world, (438). This system of organizing workers from the bottom up, rather than from the top down, is more in keeping with the idea of socialism that Albert Camus defends in his work *"The Rebel"*. Against the authoritarianism and totalitarianism of the communist system, the author defends the importance of self-organization and the role of trade unions in society.

In addition, it is possible to find numerous references to social measures that are more typical of social democracy. In the government camp, the workers themselves create their own social insurance to help each other without having to resort to charity. The narrator himself, in chapter fourteen, cites communist and social democratic leaders together as symbols of the same struggle against power:

If you who own the things people must have could understand this, you might preserve yourself. If you could separate causes from results, if you could know that Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin, were results, not causes, you might survive. But that you cannot know. For the quality of owning freezes you forever into "I", and cuts you off forever from the "we". (158)

As Mora describes in her essay, Steinbeck: "El autor no finaliza su libro con Tom Joad a la cabeza de la lucha, sino con Rose of Sharon, dando auxilio a un hombre moribundo, simbolizando un humanismo que procede de Emerson más que de la doctrina marxista", (165). In this example, we can see once again how the Marxist influence in *The Grapes of Wrath* seems to have been softened by the humanist tradition of American literature.

### Steinbeck's Description of North American Working Conditions

As we saw earlier, this work criticizes the process of accumulation of power, property and wealth by large owner companies. These, together with the big banks, took advantage of the poverty situation of the small farmers, caused by the serious economic situation of the country. They absorbed the small properties, increasing their patrimony and influence over the government. This led to the exile of thousands of farming families. This process is described in several chapters, for example in chapter nineteen: "And as time went on, the business men had the farms, and the farms grew larger, but there were fewer of them. [...] And all the time the farms grew larger and the owners fewer." (243) The great

accumulation of power in these few companies meant that they were able to manipulate prices for their own benefit. In doing so, they interfered with free competition and were able to absorb small companies that were not capable of competing under such conditions with large business groups. In addition, the big powers manipulated the workers making them compete among themselves taking advantage of their situation of misery and hunger. As Steinbeck explains, employers offered many more jobs than were available. This meant that in each place so many workers competed for the same job, and in such a situation of need, that the employers could reduce wages as much as they wanted. In that situation, they were sure that there would always be workers willing to work in exchange for a tiny wage, or even just for some bread for their children.

One of the main causes of the social situation described in the work is the mechanization process. This forced an enormous sector of the population to face an economic and productive reality very different from the one they were accustomed to.

Simple agrarian folk who had not changed with industry, who had not formed with machines or know the power and danger of machines in private hands. They had not grown up in the paradoxes of industry. Their senses were still sharp to the ridiculousness of the industrial life. (295)

Steinbeck denounces the dehumanization caused by the industrialization process. The big landowners lost direct contact with their land. This caused them to lose respect for the true value of the land. Unlike the previous landowners, these new landowners did not work the land themselves, nor were they directly dependent on its production: “And it came about that owners no longer worked on their farms. They farmed on paper; and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it, and remembered only that they owned it, remembered only what they gained and lost by it.” (243)

This work achieves a very humane description of the tragic personal consequences of individuals affected by this type of violence. The author analyzes the process of how hatred and fear spread in the population. People who still own property or keep their jobs developed a great distrust of the most oppressed, for fear of losing what little they still had. This hatred, fueled by the local authorities, increased inequality among the population. The middle class was almost completely destroyed, and a very large sector of the population was pushed into a situation of social marginalization. This situation was aggravated by the cruelty of the big landowners. All the excess production was destroyed in order to maintain prices. The big companies prevented people in need from taking

advantage of this food, despite the serious food crisis. Even if they owned land that they did not work, they prevented families from ploughing it to feed their children: “A fallow field is a sin and the unused land a crime against the thin children.” (245). In general, the economic powers manipulated the working class by making it pursue an economic situation that they could not achieve:

We been a-lookin', Ma. Been walkin' out sence we can't use the gas no more. Been goin' in ever' gate, walkin' up to ever' house, even when we knowed they wasn't gonna be nothin'. Puts a weight on ya. Goin' out lookin' for somepin you know you ain't gonna find. (366)

The work offered was not enough to employ the thousands of unemployed. To find a permanent job was almost impossible. People were forced to wander in search of employment, gradually losing hope, and feeling their *wrath* grow.



## **Social Commitment of American Literature during the Second Half of the Twentieth Century**

We will now focus now on the second half of the twentieth century. American postmodernist literature has generally been regarded as politically uncommitted. However, some literary critics such as Linda Hutcheon advocate the involvement of this generation of writers with American society. In this chapter, we will attempt to establish the possible connections between the social, political, and philosophical changes that occurred since the 1950s and the social implication of American literature. In particular, we will take Charles Bukowski's *Post Office* as an example. With the analysis of this work, we will try to study the characteristics of social criticism in postmodern literature, in order to make a comparison with the social criticism of the proletarian novel. Specifically, we will see how Bukowski makes a very different critique of the working conditions of American society from that of Steinbeck. He denounces a more complex manipulation of the population, carried out by new economic powers, which restrict individual freedom not so much through physical coercion, but through a conditioning of the opinion of the masses.

### **Neorealism and Dirty Realism**

In the first chapter, we recalled some of the scientific, political and philosophical advances that changed the intellectual and artistic paradigm of the second half of the twentieth century. These changes opened new horizons in the conception of reality and in the way in which it could be represented through fiction. Experimentation to capture this new reality defined the characteristics of postmodernist literature.

During the 1950s, American literature again developed a strong interest in the social reality of the country. This new realistic current is known as Neorealism. Unlike the social realism of the 1930s, which emerged as a response to a serious economic situation, neorealism emerged as a critique of an enriched and affluent society. This society was conformist, following the guidelines of social success marked by the economic powers, and had settled into an attitude of complacency. The establishment imposed its ideas by the use of propaganda, taking advantage of the reach of the new

media. In general, art and culture were contaminated with the official ideas imposed by the powers, and became part of that official propaganda, losing its critical function. In response to this situation, the neo-realist currents rebelled against this conformism, defending a critical literature, free from the manipulation of the establishment. One of the methods used to express this philosophy was the figure of the "Rebel". This became the central motive of American literature in the 1950s, especially in novels and short stories. The protagonists reject the system in which they live. They refuse to accept the dictates of official propaganda. They feel alone in society. These works explore the lives of those people who deny the conventions and domesticated moral values of society and rebel against the system. This new realistic philosophy is present in authors such as J.D. Salinger, in authors belonging to the Beat Generation, in Truman Capote's non-fiction novel, or in the different modalities of New Journalism.

This new trend influenced the realistic character of the literature of the following decades. Similar social criticism can be found in so-called Dirty Realism, especially in the works of Charles Bukowski, one of its main representatives. Unlike other postmodernist authors, Bukowski uses a minimalist style, where the use of adjectives and adverbs is reduced to a minimum, preferring a less rhetorical and more direct style, where the effect on the reader is more important than the form of the text. Dirty Realism describes the dark side of capitalism and society. It denounces the alienation of the population, the loss of identity and individual personality due to manipulation. As we will see, it highlights the right of the individual to create his own identity through the exercise of freedom and creativity. Criticizing the conservative character of American society, it defends disobeying cultural conventions and living according to one's own personal convictions, developed through one's own experience. These realistic characteristics can be considered as one of the bases of the development of postmodern literature. This conflict between external and internal reality seems to be the beginning of ontological concerns about the distinction between reality and fiction, so present in the postmodernist works of the 1960s and 1970s.

### **Social Criticism in *Post Office***

*Post Office* was published in 1976. Like most of Charles Bukowski's works, it contains a strong autobiographical character. In this work, the author narrates his own

personal experience, and describes the twelve years he spent working as a mail carrier for the United States Postal Service, in Los Angeles. With an acidic and ironic tone, he makes a strong critique of American society and its values. Despite the protagonist's apparent selfishness, he reflects a high level of humanism and a special commitment to individual freedom. We will analyze the content of this work in different sections.

## Political Ideology and Postmodernism

One of the main reasons why postmodernist literature has been accused of lacking social commitment is its ideological disassociation. As Hutcheon points out in her essay *The Politics of Postmodernism*, there is a great debate among literary critics about the ideology implicit in this literature: “The debates on the definition and evaluation of the postmodern have been conducted largely in political – and negative – terms: primarily neoconservative and neoMarxist. Others on the left have seen, instead, its radical political potential.” (2)

As we saw in the first chapter, after World War II, the economic situation in the United States improved considerably. Social-democratic policies once again prevailed in the country's domestic politics, and the population improved its economic situation after the ravages of the Great Depression. Working class conditions changed drastically due to technological development. Social demands were channeled through the struggle for the recognition of civil rights through democratic civil movements. Politics, in general, took on a more moderate tone. This influenced art, which gradually depoliticized. Its social commitment was more focused on the individual. Precisely, one of the characteristics of postmodern literature, as we can see in Bukowski's work, is the rejection of any kind of ideological dogma that restricts individual judgement. This critique does not attempt to reverse the capitalist economic system, but denounces its cruel side and its consequences on the human spirit. As Hutcheon explains about postmodernism: “Its complicitous critique, then, situates the postmodern squarely within both economic capitalism and cultural humanism – two of the mayor dominants of much of the western world.” (13)

The political commitment of this literature consists of an opposition against power and against authority. According to Hutcheon, this attitude comes from the 1960s: “Deriving its ideological grounding from a general 1960's challenging of authority and its historical consciousness (and conscience) from the inscription into history of women

and ethnic/racial minorities during those years.” (10). Postmodernist literature distrusts power and ideologies. Hutcheon points out the importance of this distrust in order to be able to represent reality faithfully. Unlike literature, other media such as television lack this critical character:

Most television, in its unproblematized reliance on realist narrative and transparent representational conventions, is pure commodified complicity, without the critique needed to define the postmodern paradox. That critique, I will argue, is crucial to the definition of the postmodern, whatever its acknowledged complicity. It is part of what some see as the unfinished project of the 1960's, for, at very least, those years left in their wake a specific and historically determined distrust of ideologies of power and a more general suspicion of the power of ideology. (10)

Therefore, postmodernist authors rebel against any kind of centralizing power that slows down the freedom of each individual. They defend difference against homogeneity. They reject any kind of domination. They denounce the imposition of an official culture and history. As Hutcheon explains, postmodernism implies: “A general cultural awareness of the existence and power of systems of representation which do not reflect society.” (8) The individual has the right to subvert social conventions through his own experience. This is one of the main objectives that postmodern literature sets itself, to subvert the conventions of society, but without overturning them: “At once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world.” (11). Deconstruct ideological conventions. According to Hutcheon, we can observe: “De-doxification of both bourgeois and Marxist notion of class.” (4) Postmodern literature questions all aspects of society that are wrongly regarded as natural:

It seems reasonable to say that the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as “natural” (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact “cultural”; made by us, not given to us. (2)

Therefore, this literature exalts the contradiction between the individual and the culture. According to Hutcheon:

We find a further contradiction. It is one which juxtaposes and gives equal value to the self-reflexive and the historically grounded: to that which is inward-directed and belongs to the world of art (such as parody) and that which is outward-directed and belongs to “real life” (such as history). The tension between these apparent opposites finally defines the paradoxically worldly texts of postmodernism. And it sparks, just as powerfully, their no less real, if ultimately compromised politics. (2)



The contradiction between what the individual creates personally (through freedom and art) and what is imposed on him by the dominant culture in society.

### *Post Office* and Existentialist Philosophy

The concept of freedom that we find in Bukowski's work seems to show certain parallels with the philosophical currents analyzed in the first chapter. Like the existentialism present in Albert Camus' work, Bukowski exalts freedom as a primary responsibility of the individual. For both, culture is only a human creation. Man has the responsibility to decide for himself his identity and his ideas. Both Camus and Bukowski agree in highlighting the importance of art and the novel as a means of achieving that freedom. In several passages of the work, we can observe the role that literature and art play in the life of the protagonist of *Post Office*. Art appears always linked to exclusion and marginality, to the price paid for seeking personal identity. Chinaski reads the biography of classical music composers and describes his admiration for their way of life: "Most of these men's lives were so tortured that I enjoyed reading about them, thinking, well, I am in hell too and I can't even write music." (75) In the third chapter, Chinaski reads the autobiographical novel that his companion Janko is writing. In his opinion, the novel is honest at the beginning. It describes faithfully the conditions of society. However, in the last part, it becomes more idealized. Chinaski criticizes the lack of realism when the novel describes the working conditions at the Post Office: "I was hoping for him as I read. Then the novel fell apart. For some reason the moment he started writing about the post office, the thing lost reality." (76) Chinaski advises Janko to leave his job and devote his time just to writing. Only then, he could be free to describe reality, without manipulation: "Look, kid, why don't you quit this job? Go to a small room and write. Work it out." (77) When Janko says he cannot do it because he needs to earn money to eat, Chinaski criticizes his lack of courage: "It's a good thing a few others didn't think that way. It's a good thing Van Gogh didn't think that way." (77)

Precisely, *Post Office* ends when Chinaski, the author's alter ego, decides to write a novel describing his personal experience: "In the morning it was morning and I was still alive. Maybe I'll write a novel, I thought. And then I did." (115). The author thus establishes a parallel between his work and his life. Although he had published some

stories in his youth, and some poems while working as a mail carrier, Bukowski was able to devote himself exclusively to writing when he left his job at the post office at the age of 49. As he himself said, he preferred to take the risk of dedicating himself to writing, to continue working in the office and to lose his sanity.

It is also important to highlight the presence of the marginal in Bukowski's life and work. He decides to marginalize himself from society in order to avoid alienation and, in his work, we can see his preference for the marginal sectors of society. It is a way of maintaining his freedom from the official rules of the establishment. The most favored sections of the population are subject to more direct and authoritarian manipulation due to their proximity to power. Chinaski resigns as mail carrier for first time just when he is promoted to regular, which apparently implied better conditions: "Somehow, I was not too happy. I was not a man to deliberately seek pain, the job was still difficult enough, but somehow it lacked the old glamour of my sub days—the not knowing-what-the-hell was going to happen next." (30) All the flats where the protagonist use to live are marginal places, but this does not seem to be a problem for him: "The furniture was old and ripped, the rug almost colorless. Empty beer cans on the floor. I was in the right place." (61) The protagonist sees the advantages of this kind of life. When he invites a girl to his flat and she asks him how he can live in these conditions, Chinaski responds: "It keeps me modest." (70)

Throughout the play, the protagonist seems to try to escape from the masses. He regrets not being able to spend more time alone. The only time he spends alone is when he drives from home to work. He desires more personal freedom, escape from society: "To get away from the coarse and stupid crowd." (76) Chinaski denounces the polarization of society. He criticizes the huge gap that exists between rich or successful people and marginal sectors. When Betty is dying in the hospital, Chinaski is outraged by the lack of care of the medical staff: "I'll bet if that were the president or governor or mayor or some rich son of a bitch, there would be doctors all over that room doing something! Why do you just let them die? What's the sin in being poor?" (66) Focusing on the marginal is a common feature of postmodern literature. The loss of a unique and objective reality broke the respect for traditional canons. Literature, which had been exclusive to western authors, of European and male roots, was opened to previously marginalized sectors. The voice of women, African Americans and other ethnic American

groups finally began to be heard in literary circles. In this sense, these authors clashed with previous generations of modernist authors, who defended a more elitist literature.

In general, it is possible to recognize in Chinaski the kind of rebellion explained in the works of Camus and Jünger. Without revolutionary pretensions, the protagonist rebels against external impositions that restrict his freedom. However, this rebellion carries with it a great responsibility. It implies having to face the harshness and complexity of deciding for oneself. Chinaski compares his situation with that of Joyce's parakeets. When he opens the door of his cage to free them, they doubt freedom, afraid to leave their comfort and safety:

Both birds looked at that cage door. They couldn't understand it and they could. I could feel their tiny minds trying to function. They had their food and water right there, but what was that open space?" [...] "It was a hell of a decision. Humans, birds, everything has to make these decisions. It was a hard game. (50)

He feels the same when he finally leaves his job at the Post Office and decides to risk writing: "I was like Joyce's damned parakeets. After living in the cage I had taken the opening and flown out—like a shot into the heavens. Heavens?" (112). Chinaski admits the fear he feels when he leaves the place where he had been confined for so many years.

### *Post Office* description of the American society

To understand the social implication of this work, it is important to consider the changes that American society underwent during the 1950s. Bukowski criticizes a population that, pressured by official ideas, is limited to pursuing a simple and false idea of success. These ideas create a simplified model of reality, according to the economic interests of the establishment. The population, accommodated, renounces to face the complexity of reality, and its objectives are reduced simply to follow the socially established norms of conduct, seeking only a feeling of security. The new mass society raises the pressure on the individual, who is pushed to give up his freedom for fear of failure and exclusion of the group.

A characteristic element of the social criticism of this work is humor and irony. It is a characteristic of postmodern literature. Bukowski ironizes throughout the work about the falsity of social conventions. He considers them conservative and traditional. Among others, he criticizes puritanism and the innocence of society with regard to sex. He

denounces the idealization of relationships and romanticism, as when Chinaski warns his wife against the romantic flattery of a partner:

Look, you're small-town. I've had over 50 jobs, maybe a hundred. I've never stayed anywhere long. What I am trying to say is, there is a certain game played in offices all over America. The people are bored, they don't know what to do, so they play the office-romance game. Most of the time it means nothing but the passing of time. [...] You've got to understand that it doesn't mean anything and then you won't get hurt. (51)

Faced with this idealization, Bukowski shows a realistic character. He describes couple's relationships full of arguments, fights and separations, showing their true complexity. Relationships that do not conform to any code of moral conduct, imposed by official interests, but to the reality of the human condition. It does not hide its defects and taboos. From this comes the name of "dirty" realism, because it shows the most sordid side of the human being and of society.

### Bukowski's Description of North American Working Conditions

With the same ironic tone, the author explains how people who pursue this false social success end up pushed to accept authoritarian working conditions, and end up consuming their lives in automated jobs, trapped in a dehumanized bureaucracy: "Well, as the boys said, you had to work somewhere. So they accepted what there was. This was the wisdom of the slave." (110). Focusing particularly on the conditions of post office workers, he denounces the continuing abuses of power by managers. Firstly, it describes how the company constantly monitors the private life of its employees. The first chapter includes the office's strict code of ethics: "All postal personnel must act with unwavering integrity and complete devotion to the public interest. Postal personnel are expected to maintain the highest moral principles..." (8) Chapter 5 contains several of the warnings the post office uses to threaten Chinaski, for maintaining a rebellious attitude towards its rules:

Employees are expected to conduct themselves during and outside of working hours in a manner which will reflect favorably upon the Postal Service. Although it is not the policy of the Post Office Department to interfere with the private lives of employees, it does require that Postal personnel be honest, reliable, trustworthy, and of good character and reputation. (95)

Office managers make employees work twelve-hour night shifts. When they finish their day, they are forced to do extra work. They charge them with routes they know are impossible to complete, especially as punishment for workers who behave

inappropriately. They force them to compete with each other, forcing them to do continuous exams, and always keeping them under stress, timed and watched. Chinaski is surprised that the rest of the employees give in to these abuses and strive to achieve the goals imposed on them. He complains to the manager, but only receives more pressure:

"How can I work 12 hours a night, sleep, eat, bathe, travel back and forth, get the laundry and the gas, the rent, change tires, do all the little things that have to be done and still study the scheme?" I asked one of the instructors in the scheme room.-"Do without sleep,"- he told me. (60)

This system cancels out the personal lives of workers, who are treated as mere instruments at the service of the company. Chinaski considers it absurd how many colleagues waste their lives trying to prosper within the company in a useless way. The harder they try, the worse their disappointment. In the first chapter, he describes how a veteran postman, G.G., had managed to have one of the best routes thanks to his dedication. He even used to hand out candy to neighborhood kids while he delivered the mail. However, one day he is accused of corruption of minors by a neighbor who did not know him. No one defends him in the company. When it collapses, Chinaski is the only one to help him: "I looked around, nobody was concerned. They all professed, at one time or another, to be fond of him—"G.G.'s a good guy." But the "good old guy" was sinking and nobody cared." (28) Chinaski warns the person in charge of G.G.'s situation, but he is only concerned with finding a substitute for his route. The next day, G.G. did not return to work. Chinaski laments the innocence of his companion: "I never saw G.G. again. Nobody knew what happened to him. Nor did anybody ever mention him again. The "good guy." The dedicated man. Knifed across the throat over a handful of circs from a local market." (29)

Bukowski describes the psychological and physical consequences that employees suffer after spending their lives working in these conditions. He describes the weariness, loss of hope, depression and physical deterioration caused by the lack of individual freedom. After eleven years working in the Post Office, Chinaski sees his sanity and health endangered: "And there I was, dizzy spells and pains in the arms, neck, chest, everywhere. I slept all day resting up for the job. On weekends I had to drink in order to forget it. I had come in weighing 185 pounds. Now I weighed 223 pounds." (104) In addition, he perceives the deterioration of his companions:

*II years shot through the head. I had seen the job eat men up. They seemed to melt. There was Jimmy Potts of Dorsey Station. When I first came in, Jimmy had been a well-built guy in a white*

*T shirt. Now he was gone. He put his seat as close to the floor as possible and braced himself from falling over with his feet. He was too tired to get a haircut and had worn the same pair of pants for 3 years. He changed shirts twice a week and he walked very slow. They had murdered him. He was 55. He had 7 years to go until retirement. (104)*

After that time, Chinaski decides to leave the job definitively. That is when he decides to write his experience in a novel.

In general, postmodernist social criticism implies a new kind of realism that takes into account the sentimental variable. It gives equal value to the material dimension of reality and to the dimension of emotions and spirit. This characteristic will be present in much of American literature in the second half of the twentieth century. Modern society is characterized by an abundance of material means and a high sense of security, but it can also lead to a reduction in the individual's personal experience. This literature collects the emotions of sadness and deep boredom that this provokes in people. As David Foster Wallace explains about his work, in an interview with Eduardo Lago, (published in Lago's essay *Walt Whitman ya no vive aquí (2018)*): “La tristeza es algo tangible, está ahí, es una realidad. [...] Mi novela es un intento por entender una especie de tristeza que es inherente al capitalismo”. (15) The struggle against this sense of alienation will characterize the social and political commitment of postmodern American literature.

## CONCLUSIONS

In general, after analyzing Bukowski and Steinbeck's novels, it is possible to establish certain similarities and differences between the social criticism implicit in dirty realism and that developed by social realism. These observations help to define some of the characteristics of the political and social commitment of American postmodernist literature.

First, one of the main differences between the two works analyzed is the link between Steinbeck's novel and Marxist ideology. *Post Office*, on the contrary, shows a defense of individual freedom contrary to any kind of ideological dogma. As we have seen, this may be due to the loss of influence of communist ideology in Western countries after the end of World War II. In spite of everything, the influence of Marxism in Steinbeck's novel can be considered quite limited. As we saw in chapter two, the socialism present in *The Grapes of Wrath* is a socialism of a libertarian and union character, which does not attack property rights in general, but only denounces their accumulation in the hands of a small number of people. It criticizes the innumerable defects of the capitalist system that provoked the crisis of the 1930s, but he does not defend revoking the system. This libertarian character of the novel may be due to the humanistic and democratic tradition of American literature. In addition, the social critique of the two works studied denounces the manipulation of society by very different economic powers. The economic conditions of the 1930s allowed the accumulation of power in a few companies that gained enough influence to manage working conditions, coercing the population through violence and misery. On the contrary, postmodernist literature criticizes a society that is richer and more affluent, but governed by new economic powers capable of manipulating the masses thanks to new technological advances, conditioning their behavior.

Secondly, we have been able to establish other characteristics of postmodern social commitment thanks to its qualities inherited directly from modernist literature. As we have seen in chapters two and three, the defense of individual freedom, the defense of one's own personal experience and the presence of movement or change (characteristics that define postmodernist literature), are also elements that have defined American literature since its origins.

In general, we have been able to identify in postmodern literature a new realistic character, which, unlike traditional realism, not only takes into account the materialistic part of reality, but also exalts the importance of the individual's spiritual and emotional state. In this sense, as in Camus' existentialism, individual freedom and creativity acquire transcendental and ontological importance in the creation of human identity. As Hutcheon points out, this contradiction between the external and internal reality of the individual characterizes postmodern literature, and largely defines its political commitment to the decentralization of power, against any type of authority or dogma that impedes the complete personal realization of each individual. It also defines its democratic character, as it defends rebellion against revolution, while at the same time defends the marginal sectors of society. Postmodern struggle focuses on unmasking the official character of social conventions, and on pointing out the importance of self-management. He exalts the need to face with courage the responsibility of being truly free, to be able to face the complexity of the unknown, the immensity of the real.

It is not surprising, therefore, to observe the growing importance that American literature is gradually acquiring in recent years within English philological studies. As we have seen throughout these three chapters, American literature is an indispensable element for studying and understanding the development of human society from the modern age to the present day. Moreover, their democratic and social commitment makes these works of great didactic value in today's society, due to growing mistrust of democratic values and the reappearance of new totalitarian ideologies caused by the current economic crisis.

It would be interesting, in future studies, to be able to deepen the analysis of the social commitment of American postmodern literature, through the study of the works of other relevant postmodernist authors. Within this field, it could be especially interesting to analyze the influence that the North American counterculture exerted on the country's postmodern literature.



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